

Knowledge as the Unity of the Intellect and the Object of Intellection in Islamic Philosophy: A Historical Survey from Plato to Mulla Sadra

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Transcendent Philosophy: An International Journal for Comparative Philosophy and Mysticism,
Vol. 1, Number 1, (June 2000), pp. 73-91

I. Problem Stated

The kind of relationship that one can establish between the knowing subject and the object known is one of the cardinal issues of epistemology and has given rise to a number of positions within Greek and Islamic philosophy. Of these, the doctrine that has come to be known as the unity of the subject who intellects and the object of intellection (*ittihad al-'aql wa'l-ma'qul*) underlies a deep and persistent current in Islamic philosophy. Sadr al-Din Shirazi (980/1572-1050/1640), known as Mulla Sadra, is without doubt the most ardent exponent of this doctrine with his extensive analyses and glosses in addition to a separate treatise devoted to the subject. With Sadra, the idea of knowledge as a unity of the intellect and the object of intellection becomes the hallmark of all post-Sadorean epistemology. This view was a logical outcome of Sadra's bold attempt to cast the whole story of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) in terms of being (*al-wujud*) and its modes, an attempt whose formulation given by Sadra has tremendous implications for epistemological thinking in the post-Avicennan Islamic philosophy.

In his magnum opus *Asfar*, Sadra, after quoting Farabi's celebrated treatise on the intellect with some variations, gives a summary genealogy of this idea and traces it back to the famous *Theology of Aristotle* (*uthulujjiyyah Aristu*), hence describing it as an implicit, if not explicitly admitted, part of the Peripatetic school. Sadra repeatedly refers to the failure of earlier philosopher, especially that of Ibn Sina and his close disciples, in

refuting this view, and expresses his bewilderment as to how they denied it as mere poetry and imagination.

In this treatise [i.e., Farabi's *Risalah fi'l-'aql*], there are parts that clearly point to the unity of the intellect with the intelligibles and to the possibility of man's becoming a simple active intellect in whom all the intelligibles are united. In addition to the clear writings of this teacher [Farabi], there is also the book *Uthulujjiyyah* attributed to the first teacher Aristotle and what the headmaster [Ibn Sina] narrates from some of the students of this great philosopher. [By this], I mean Porphyry who wrote a book on the intellect and the intelligibles, which has a section on the unity of the intellect with the intelligibles and its union with the active intellect. There is also a book on this very subject by Alexander of Aphrodisias whom the master [Ibn Sina] describes as a virtuous and knowledgeable philosopher among the ancients. In spite of all these [works], they, in a surprising way, permitted the denial of this sublime matter and the [level of] exaggeration with which those who did not examine the matter carefully rejected it like the later philosopher and Ibn Sina and those who came after him did until our own day. Anyone who has not reached this state [of knowledge and understanding] should follow the will that Ibn Sina states at the end of the *Isharat*.'[1]

Insofar as the relation between the knowing subject and the object known is concerned, we may detect, according to Sadra's classification, three major theories of knowledge, which are strictly of philosophical nature in Islamic thought. The first view is the relational theory of knowledge (*idafah*) that construes knowledge as a relation arising between the subject and the object. Defended chiefly by Fakhr al-Din al-Razi and a host of later theologians (*muta'akhhirun*), the notion of knowledge as a relation between the mind and objects hinges upon a number of premises. The most fundamental premise of this view is its construal of the domain of objects/facts as bereft of intrinsic intelligibility. Since the knowledge of objects arises as a relation in the mind, the objects that exist in the extra-mental sphere do not possess a cognitive content prior to their intellection by the mind. This makes knowledge a property of the knower -- a position that underlies much of modern epistemology. From the point of view of the subject, to say that intellection (*ta'qqul*) obtains only as a relation between the subject and the object is equal to positing a subject without ideas and concepts, a subject whose possibility is

denied even by Ibn Sina's famous 'suspended man' (al-insan al-muta'alliq).[2] When taken to its logical extreme, as some critiques of it like Sadra do, knowledge as a relation presents a number of grave difficulties, which we have to leave for another discussion.

The second view of knowledge is the representational theory of knowledge (al-'ilm al-irtisami or al-'ilm al-husuli al-irtisami). The Peripatetic philosophers were the privileged patrons of this view as they were content with focusing on representation (rasm, irtisam) as the most important and potent form of knowledge. Similar to Wittgenstein's picture theory of language minus his strict atomism, the theory of knowledge as representation underlies the epistemological orthodoxy of classical philosophy and is again based on a number of ontological and cosmological postulates. Said briefly, this view states that knowledge is a true representation of the external world in the mind if and when there is a veritable correspondence (tatabuq) between the extra-mental object and its mental picture. Thus 'mirroring', to use a Rortian language, becomes the proper abode and method of all knowledge. It is the impressions that we gather from the external world that give us a picture of the world, whose truth value is judged by the correspondence obtained between the mental impressions and the physical world. Defined as such, knowledge as representation and/or impression presupposes the existence of objects prior to the knowing subject. It is obvious that this theory of knowledge would face a number of difficulties especially in cases where the reality and impression are given as a single unity such as in the case of self-knowledge and God's knowledge of things.[3]

The third view of knowledge which was proposed, we may assume, as a response to the first two is called knowledge by presence or presential knowledge (al-'ilm al-huduri). Developed and defended primarily by the illuminationist (al-ishraqiyyun) philosophers, the concept of knowledge as presence (hudur) undercuts the very foundations of the representational theory of knowledge and casts the whole story of knowledge in terms of being (wujud) and its modes (anha' al-wujud). Although Suhrawardi, the founder of the school of illumination (ishraq), was an essentialist in his ontology and did not consider being (wujud) any more than a general term abstracted by the mind, the posterity turned away from his essentialist ontology (asalat al-mahiyyah) while retaining the metaphysics of light that he had espoused. Thus, Suhrawardi's life-

long preoccupation with self-knowledge and his rigorous definition of all knowledge as light and presence came to represent the biggest challenge ever faced by the representational theory of knowledge both in Islamic and Western philosophy.[4]

All of this brings us to Mulla Sadra, who has given the most extensive account of knowledge as the unity of the intellect and the object of intellection in Islamic philosophy. It was Sadra's grand synthesis that put knowledge as presence and the unity of the intellect and the object of intellection, which is a corollary of the first view, at the center of all epistemology in the post-Sadorean era of Islamic philosophy. Sadra's epistemology of being revolves around the fundamental idea that knowledge is predicated upon the essential unity (ittihad) that obtains between the intellect or the knower ('aql) and the object of intellection or the known (ma'qul).[5] Hence the title of Sadra's celebrated treatise 'ittihad al-'aql wa'l-ma'qul', a title which defines, both historically and philosophically, much of the post-Sadorean epistemology in Islamic philosophy.

More often than not, Sadra proudly declares this view to be one of the crown achievements of his philosophy, which he calls 'transcendent wisdom' (al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah), an achievement which as great a mind as even Ibn Sina was not able to foresee. Putting the language of triumphalism aside, Sadra is aware of the fact that the kind of unity that he envisages in the process of knowing runs against the common sense epistemology which is based on the binary opposition of the subject and the object. Furthermore, there is an unremitting opposition to it by the Peripatetics, especially by Ibn Sina who did not hesitate to call it 'sheer sophistry and poetry'. Although Sadra firmly believed that the Peripatetic position on this particular question was never decided and that Ibn Sina and others implicitly accepted it, he always warned against simplistic attempts to grasp the true meaning of the union which he advocates. It is for this reason that he always states a number of aphorisms and even prayers after giving his full account of the subject.[6] Sadra's main concern, we may infer, is to show the philosophical subtlety of the argument by insisting that the ultimate grasp of the matter thrives on a metaphysical vision or insight, which is hoped to take us beyond the minimalist oppositions of common sense epistemology, and which he calls 'essential witness' (shuhud 'ayni). Keeping this point in mind, Sadra's reading of the history of philosophy, both Islamic and Greek, to which he owes on this particular issue more than we may

expect, displays a remarkable attempt of reconstruction and synthesis. At any rate, Sadra was aware of the long and surprisingly persistent history of this idea in both Greek and Islamic traditions. In what follows, we will try to give a historical analysis of the subject, hoping that this background will contribute to our understanding of the problem as it is addressed by Mulla Sadra.

II. The Greek Background

It is customary to turn to Plotinus and the neo-Platonists for the full exposition of the idea that knowledge comes about as a union between the intellect and the object of intellection. Indeed, Plotinus gives a considerable space to its analysis in the *Enneads* which has remained to this day the locus classicus in Greek on the subject. We also know that this idea was both hailed and criticized as the hallmark of neo-Platonism. Even though the poor Plotinus never enjoyed the celebrity of Aristotle because parts of his *Enneads* (IV, V and VI) were translated into Arabic as the *Kitab Uthulujiyya Aristotalis* and his name *aflutin* or *aflutinus* and nickname *al-shayk al-yunani* is a rarity in classical Arabic sources[7], his disciple and biographer Porphyry (*furfirius* in Arabic) was credited (or discredited) for envisaging an essential unity between *nous*, *noon* and *noeton*, namely the intellect, the process of intellection and the object of intellection. Prior to Plotinus' bold exposition and defense of the subject, however, there is a trajectory of development we have to pursue, which will ultimately bring us back to Plotinus himself.

Plato's *Dialogues* do not present a full-fledged defense or discussion of the problem. Nevertheless there are certain passages which we may take as pointing to the direction taken by Plotinus and other Platonists. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates, when giving his argument about the immortality of the soul only minutes before drinking the poison in his cell, refers to a relationship of *homoiōs* between the *ousia* and the *psuche* (77 a). The human soul, which is the intelligible principle in man, shares with the essence or archetypal reality of things something fundamental, which makes it superior to the perishable body.

'Yes, Socrates, I am convinced that ... the existence of the soul before birth cannot be separated from the existence of the essence of which you speak. For there is nothing which to my mind is so patent as that beauty, goodness, and the other notions of

which you were just now speaking, have a most real and absolute existence' (Phaedo, 76 d-77 a).

Furthermore, the soul (nous) is akin to the intelligible world in such a way that it faces no difficulty in uniting with the ousia of things. The Platonic philosopher attains happiness in this world only by becoming one with the intelligible world.

'...the true lover of knowledge is always striving after being -- that is his true nature; he will not rest in the multiplicity of individuals ... until he have attained the knowledge of the true nature of every essence by a sympathetic and kindred power in the soul, and by that power drawing near (pleesiasas) and mingling (migeis) and becoming incorporate with very being (too onti ontos), having begotten mind and truth, he will have knowledge...!' (The Republic, VI, 490 b-c).

This is not to suggest that there is an absolute unity between the soul and the Forms. It is, however, true to say that the soul, being immortal, simple, and indivisible, belongs to the Divine order (80 a-b).

This makes the soul share something of the Divine, on the basis of which man is innately capable of knowing.[8] The isomorphic unity between the possessor of knowledge and what it knows is, of course, a Greek idea as old as the pre-Socratics, and Aristotle gives a well-informed account of it in the *De Anima* (404 b) and cites the *Timaeus* as one of its primary sources among the Greeks.[9] The idea that 'only the like can know the like' (homoio to homoion) underlines the essential unity between man and what can be known, suggesting that the intellect and what it knows cannot be of two separate orders of reality. On the contrary, they belong to the realm of the intelligible, a realm in which the intellect, intellection and what is intellected constitute a unity without fissure. This turns all knowledge into the exclusive property of the intelligible world because the intellect knows to the extent to which it participates in the reality of the intelligible. In other words, the homogeneity of the intellect with the intelligible renders knowledge possible, and every act of true knowledge becomes a way of sharing in the intelligible world.[10]

In a surprising way, Aristotle, despite his professed language of immanence against Plato's transcendentalism, speaks of a unity between noetos and noeta, viz., the objects of thought and the soul or the mind (*De Anima*, 430 a). This somewhat enigmatic

part of the *De Anima*, whose few lines have captured the attention of the neo-Platonists as well as the Peripatetics for a long time and led to the writing of a number of commentaries, depicts immaterial substances as displaying an isomorphic unity between episteme and episteton, namely the process of thinking and being thought. This unity is reached when the potential intellect becomes actual by thinking the intelligible substance. Aristotle's text reads as follows:

'We have stated ... that the intellect, prior to thinking, is in a certain way potentially the intelligible objects but is none of them actually; and it should [be regarded potentially] as [being] in a tablet which has no actual writing. This is indeed the case with the intellect. Moreover the intellect itself is intelligible like the [other] intelligible objects. For in the case of objects without matter, that which thinks and that which is being thought are the same, for theoretical knowledge and its knowable object are the same' (*De Anima*, 429 b- 430 a).[11]

Aristotle's version of this problem is obviously imbedded in a number of postulates that he puts forward concerning the Divine intellect and the self-intelligibility of the intellect, a fundamental issue into which we cannot enter here.[12] In addition to the *De Anima*, Aristotle makes a similar point in the *Metaphysics*, which combines in a sense the so-called distinction between the psychological and cosmological intellects.

'If thinking and being thought of are different, in respect of which does goodness belong to thought? For to be an act of thinking and to be an object of thought are not the same thing. We answer that in some cases the knowledge is the object. In the productive sciences it is the substance or essence of the object, matter omitted, and in the theoretical sciences the definition or the act of thinking is the object. Since, then, thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its objects will be the same, i.e., the thinking will be one with the object of its thought' (*Metaphysics*, XII, 1074b-1075a).[13]

These lines of Aristotle were interpreted by the posterity to prove the self-subsistence of the Divine Intellect that contains the principles of intellection in its own essence. Furthermore, the idea of the intellect as having the principle of intellection in itself was a corollary of the hylomorphic epistemology of the Peripatetics. Since knowledge, in the Peripatetic perspective, is based on abstracting the intelligible form of

things from their material garment, the farther removed a thing is from matter, the closer it is to the intelligible realm. This explains Aristotle's insistence that the immaterial intelligible substances are both intelligible and the subject of their intellection. As Ibn Sina would later say, every intelligible form (*al-surah al-ma'qulah*) contains its principle of intellection and intelligibility in itself and becomes purely actual and realized when detached, namely abstracted from its material matrix.[14]

The Peripatetic principles that we just summarized, as formulated by Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, were incorporated by the Muslim Peripatetics and applied to God's knowledge in order to address the question of Divine intellection. Whether what the posterity made out of those few lines coincided with what Aristotle meant is something we can not decide here. It is, however, certain that the later readers and commentators of Aristotle interpreted him as saying that the unity between the intellect and the object of its intellection is a *sine qua non* of all veritable knowledge in things without matter, i.e., the intelligible substances. The numerous references to Aristotle in the Sadrean corpus, whether from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Uthulujyyah* or from the translations of the *De Anima*[15], give weight to the view that Aristotle's scant remarks on this particular problem were read through the eyes of Alexander of Aphrodisias, whom Farabi calls the 'exegete'. [16]

The *De Intellectu*, attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias, is one of the key Greek texts under whose light the later commentators, neo-Platonists and Muslim philosophers read and commented upon Aristotle. In this regard, Alexander's short work, which reads more like a restatement than a commentary, is one of those key texts that have paved the way for the neo-Platonic reconstruction of Aristotle. Although we know little about the life and career of Alexander, we are informed by Porphyry that he was respected and read as an authority in the seminar of Plotinus.[17] After all, Alexander as Alexander mysticus is considered to be the source of *Aritoteles mysticus*. [18] The *De Intellectu* was translated into Arabic in the school of Hunayn ibn Ishaq as early as the 9th century and enjoyed a considerable prestige among the Muslim philosophers who used and commented upon it.[19] One major exception is perhaps Averroes who accused the Peripatetics of his day of being 'Alexandrist' in their interpretation of the Stagirate.[20] Nevertheless Sadra, for

instance, quotes the full text of the De Intellectu in his Asfar with some minor variations and omissions.[21]

The De Intellectu is the source of a number of key issues in the Aristotelian tradition. Among them, the notion of the unity of the intellect with the object of its intellection is of particular importance for our purposes here. Sadra refers to it, without actually mentioning its title, as one of the primary sources of this idea and admonishes Ibn Sina and his students for failing to appreciate Alexander's remarks about the problem. At any rate, the application of this idea to the nature of Divine knowledge was a momentous event in philosophical theology in that the epistemology of the Divine, if we may use such a term, was now linked inextricably to the ontology of the Divine: the act of the Divine at the level of knowledge results in the ontological production of what it 'knows' -- a process in which the principles and objects of intellection and the intellect itself are given all at once as a single unity. Considering Alexander's influence on Plotinus as well as the Muslim philosophers, his work is without doubt an integral part of the history of this idea and deserves more attention than we can do here.[22]

In Plotinus, we find a rigorous and very elaborate statement of the idea that the Intellectual principle is at once the means, process and object of intellection. Two important outcomes of this claim can be stated as follows. First of all, this view serves as a strong assertion of the independence and completeness of the intellect at the level of the Divine. The intellect as the logos does not depend on things for its act of intellection. Rather, its intellection is primary and by presence, viz., its ontological presence and transience by itself to itself, which is the first condition of all knowledge by presence. This is the root of Plotinus' controversial doctrine 'that the intellectual beings are not outside the Intellectual-Principle (*hoti ouch exo tou nou ta noeta*)' (The Enneads, Fifth Ennead, V, 1). For Plotinus, the Ideas are the thoughts of the Intellect. One may rightly invoke the danger of solipsism here as Plotinus himself was presented with this criticism during his lifetime[23]. We may also remember that Plato himself had to face a similar difficulty concerning the ontological status of the eide: do they exist before the Demiurgic Intellect which then thinks them as ontologically separate realities or do they exist as ontological and cosmological productions of the intellect? In any case, Plotinus' response would be his realist ontology of the ideas and the Intellect,[24] which asserts

that 'the eide are truth, they are real 'being', they exist in themselves'. This, however, is a huge subject in itself to which we cannot to justice within the confines of this study.

The second aspect of this view, which became the sine qua non of Sadra's epistemology also, can be called the constitutive theory of the intellect. If the intellect and the intelligible reality of things belong to the same ontological realm, then the intellect can no longer be conceived as a mere instrument of thinking or judgment. The instrumentalist theory of the intellect, or reason for that matter, construes reason as a means of connecting 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact'. By contrast, Plotinus regards all these elements as one single unity, included within the realm of the Intellectual-Principle. Said differently, the intellect, when fully actual, is not and cannot be different in its essence from what it produces and what it operates on. As Plotinus states in the fifth Ennead:

'Now a principle whose wisdom is not borrowed must derive from itself any intellection it may make; and anything it may possess within itself it can hold only from itself: it follows that, intellective by its own resource and upon its own content, it is itself the very things on which its intellection acts. For supposing its essence to be separable from its intellection and the objects of its intellection to be not-itself, then its essence would be unintellectual; and it would be intellectual not actually but potentially. The intellection and its object must then be inseparable -- however the habit induced by our conditions may tempt us to distinguish, there too, the thinker from the thought' (The Enneads, V, 9, 5).[25]

If this is so, then the representational theory of knowledge cannot be the main, let alone only, form of knowledge. Knowledge as representation or impression is based on the existence of objects prior to the intellect. But in things whose intelligible reality is entailed in and identical with the intellect, representation, as Sadra would later claim, can only be a second-order concept, and the idea of presence (*hudur*) as the basis of knowledge gains prominence. This implies that we know things knowable by appropriating their intelligible form/reality.

When applied to Divine knowledge, this notion establishes an ineluctable relationship between being and knowledge because what we call being comes about as a result of the Divine intellection: 'it is clear that, being Intellect, it really thinks the real

beings and establishes them in existence. It is, then, the real beings.'[26] Moreover, since the intellect itself is intelligible and object of its own intellection, everything that it creates, be it in the form of ontological production or conceptual schemes, cannot be devoid of cognitive content. The intrinsic intelligibility and thus value of being, regardless of a thinking subject, goes back to this bold assertion of Plotinus, and it was taken up by the posterity wholeheartedly as a blessing of neo-Platonism.[27] A corollary of this view is what is called 'axiarchism', namely the view that the world is grounded in value because it is generated by an Intellectual and self-intelligible principle which grants it an intrinsic value and significance.[28] The same point can be made from the point of view of the ontology of potentiality and actuality, a theme so central to the entire Aristotelian system from physics and metaphysics to cosmology and epistemology. According to this scheme, the creative principle is a fully actualized being with no potentiality. Since actuality signifies perfection and potentiality, conversely, imperfection and deficiency, the fully actual and perfect being imparts upon the world its meaning, intelligibility and value. As Kenney points out, perfection implies ontological production, which is an effect to be understood in valuational terms.[29]

III. The Islamic Philosophy

The Muslim Peripatetics, especially Farabi and Ibn Sina, took an ambivalent position on the idea of knowledge as the unity of the intellect and the object of intellection. Farabi talks about this principle only in relation to Divine intellect and its form of intellection. Ibn Sina follows more or less the same path, at least in his *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad*, but adamantly opposes it in the *Shifa'* and *al-Isharat wa'l-tanbihat* when talking about it in relation to human knowledge. Sadra notices Ibn Sina's somewhat ambiguous position on the subject and admonishes him, as we have said before, for failing to appreciate its true meaning. Sadra, however, is not alone in approaching the Avicennan position as somewhat obscure as there is an interesting debate among the modern scholars of Ibn Sina as to how to interpret his remarks on the subject.

In *al-madinat al-fadilah*, Farabi gives a clear definition of the problem:

Because the First is not in matter and has itself no matter in any way whatsoever, it is in its substance actual intellect; for what prevents the form from being intellect and

from actually thinking (intelligizing) is the matter in which a thing exists. And when a thing exists without being in need of matter, that very thing will in its substance be actual intellect; and that is the status of the First. It is, then, actual intellect ('aql bi'l-fi'l). The First is also intelligible (ma'qul) through its substance (...) It is intelligible by virtue of its being intellect; for the One whose identity (ipseitas) is intellect is intelligible by the One whose identity is intellect. In order to be intelligible, the First is in no need of another essence outside itself which would think it but it itself thinks its own essence. (...)

...The essence which is thought is the essence which thinks, and so it is intellect by virtue of its being intelligized. Thus it is intellect and intelligized and thinking[30], all this being one essence and one indivisible substance -- whereas man, for instance, is intelligible, but what is intelligible in his case is not actually intelligized but potentially intelligible; he becomes subsequently actually intelligized after the intellect has thought him[31]... We think, but not because our substance is intellect; we think with an intellect which is not what constitutes our substance; but the First is different; the intellect, the thinker and the intelligible (and intelligized) have in this one meaning and are one essence and one indivisible substance.'[32]

I have quoted this somewhat long text by Farabi to show the importance of this discussion in his theology and cosmology. The basic Aristotelian principle that things without matter are both intellect and intellecting underlies Farabi's analysis here, which was incorporated by both Ibn Sina and Sadra. The same idea is used profusely in Farabi's *Risalah fi'l-'aql* which Sadra quotes, as we have mentioned before, in his *Asfar* with some omissions.[33] Unlike Ibn Sina, however, Farabi does not indulge in any kind of polemic against Porphyry who is discredited by Ibn Sina as claiming that the soul, when it is actual, becomes identical with the object of its intellection (ma'qul).

As we have indicated before, Ibn Sina takes a hostile position towards the idea that we have been pursuing so far. Both the *Shifa'* and the *Isharat* deny any kind of union between the soul or the intellect and the object of intellection. In the *Shifa'*, he makes his famous aphorism against Porphyry:

'How shall the soul, then, become forms of things? The man who has misguided people most in this regard is the one who has composed the *Isagogy* for them... True, the forms of things come to inhere in the soul and decorates it and the soul is like a place for

them, thanks to the material intellect. If the soul became the form of an actual existent, then, since the form itself, being actuality, cannot accept anything else (i.e. any other form)...it follows necessarily that the soul cannot accept any other form.'[34]

Ibn Sina makes a similar point in the *Isharat* whose text reads as follows:

'A group of people who [claim to] pass on [the teachings of Aristotle] thought that the intellecting substance, when intellecting an intelligible form, becomes [identical with] it. Suppose that the intellecting substance thinks A. According to their claim, it becomes identical with A, viz., the object of intellection (al-ma'qul). In this case, is it in the same state as if it did not think A? Or perhaps this [i.e., intellection] did not take place. If it is like before [i.e., before its intellection], then it does not make any difference whether it intellected it or not...

There was a man among them known as Porphyry who has written a book on the intellect and the intelligibles, which is praised by the Peripatetics. All of it is gibberish. And they know very well that they do not understand it neither does Porphyry himself.

Learn this well: to claim that something becomes something else not by way of transformation from one state to another, nor by way of conjoining with something else so that a third thing may come out of it, but in such a way that a single object becomes another single object, is poetical nonsense with no meaning.' [35]

As we can see from these texts, Ibn Sina does not make any distinction between Divine and human knowledge and categorically rejects the idea, which he attributes to Porphyry. In spite of this radical rejection, Ibn Sina affirms this unity in *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad* when discussing the intellection of the Divine. The sixth chapter of this book has the following title: 'Concerning that the Necessary Being intellects by itself and is the intellect by itself, and the explanation that every form which is not attached to matter is like this, and that the intellect, the subject of intellection (al-'aql) and the object of intellection (al-ma'qul) are one and the same thing.'[36] The discrepancy between the two positions of Ibn Sina was noticed by both Suhrawardi and Sadra in their *Talwihat* and *Asfar* respectively[37]. Interestingly enough, this has also led to a live debate among the contemporary scholars of Ibn Sina, whose texts can equally be taken to lend support to both interpretations.[38]

As Sadra points out, Ibn Sina's drastic refutation of Porphyry on this particular matter is largely due to his aversion towards any kind of unity or union (*ittihad*) between two things. For Ibn Sina, who was operating within the framework of Aristotelian physics and cosmology, the unity between any two things means the termination of these two elements and the emergence of a new element. Or, it simply means 'ontic union', which he considers to be marred by a number of fallacies.[39] To ensure this position, Ibn Sina makes a bold distinction between 'unity' (*ittihad*) and conjoining or conjunction (*ittisal*), a distinction that runs through the entire Avicennan corpus.[40] When speaking of the relation between the human soul and the active intellect, for instance, the word used by Ibn Sina is always the same: *ittisal*. Being aware of this subtle point made by Ibn Sina, Sadra responds by giving a long discourse on the three meanings of unity (*ittihad*) in philosophy and physics, and invokes his celebrated teachings of the substantial movement (*al-harakat al-jawhariyyah*) and the gradation of being (*tashkik al-wujud*). We do not have space here to enter into the analysis of this subject. Nevertheless, Sadra explicitly states that it was, among others, the ignorance of these two teachings of Sadra that has led Ibn Sina and the Peripatetics to the denial of any kind of unity between two or more things.[41]

After the Peripatetics, perhaps the most important name in this long-debated issue is Suhrawardi whose ideas on self-knowledge and knowledge as a form of light had a direct impact on Sadra's epistemology. Sadra's language of light that he employs in conjunction with his epistemology is derived mostly from Suhrawardi's *ishraqi* doctrines, and the idea of knowledge by presence (*al-'ilm al-huduri*) underlies much of his notion of the unity of the intellect with the object of intellection. Having said that, we have to remind ourselves that on the question of the unity of two things in strictly physical terms, Suhrawardi's position was the same as that of Ibn Sina. The *Talwihat* clearly rejects the idea as physically impossible, providing a counter-argument similar to the one given by Ibn Sina.

Some people have thought that when the perceiver perceives something, he becomes [identical with] it. Some other people have thought that the soul perceives things through its union (*ittihad*) with the Active Intellect. You have learnt from the previous arguments that two things do not become one thing except through conjoining (*imtizaj*),

conjunction (*ittisal*) or synthesis by whole (*tarkib majmu'i*). This is one of the qualities of [physical] bodies. When we say that A became B, does A remain the same and then we have B, thus both of them becoming multiple entities? Or is it rather that A is destroyed and B did not come into being, in which case there is no unity (*ittihad*) between the two? ... When the soul thinks of A, does it remain the same as it was before [it thought of it]? If so, then there is no union or the establishment [of a new being]. Or, perhaps the soul is destroyed and something else comes into being, in which case again there is no unity [obtained between the soul and its object of intellection].[42]

In spite of this objection which was, according to Sadra's interpretation, a necessary result of the Aristotelian physics and cosmology within which both Ibn Sina and Suhrawardi operated, the idea of presence (*hudur*) and luminosity (*nuraniyyah*) as the basis of intelligibility continued to play a central role in Sadra's defense of the unity of the soul with its object of intellection. Considering the fundamental differences between the Peripatetic and Sadrean physics, it is not difficult to see how Sadra was able to overcome the problems posed by Aristotelian natural philosophy while incorporating the Suhrawardian metaphysics of light on the one hand, and the primacy of self-knowledge and consciousness on the other.[43] Furthermore, the *ishraqi* doctrines of light and knowledge provided Sadra with an arsenal of arguments to refute the Peripatetic concept of knowledge as abstraction (*tajrid*) and representation.

The pre-Sadrean adventure of this idea does not end with Suhrawardi. There are numerous references to and, in some cases, hints at the unity of the subject and object of intellection in the works of Ibn al-Arabi, Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi[44], Dawud al-Qaysari, Abu'l-Hasan al-Amiri and others. Within the confines of this essay, we have to postpone to another study the examination of these figures and the role they played in Sadra's rigorous defense of the subject. Before closing this discussion, however, we have to mention the fact that this idea had an interesting history at the hands of some Jewish and Christian philosophers writing in Arabic such as Moses Maimonides and Muhy al-Din al-Isfahani (11th or 12th century).[45] We cannot say that all of these philosophers had a 'common agenda' in defending or commenting upon this idea, this being particularly true in the case of al-Isfahani. It shows, however, the extent of the remarkably persistent history of this idea, which we tried to analyze in the present essay.

[1] *Al-hikmat al-muta'aliyah fi'l-asfar al-'aqliyyah al-arba'ah*, (cited hereafter as *Asfar*) ed. by M. Rida al-Muzaffar (Tehran, 1383), Vol. 3, Part I, p. 327. The will at the end of the *Isharat*, to which Sadra refers, exhorts those who are serious about gaining knowledge to examine philosophical matters with utmost care. See, *al-Isharat wa'l-tanbihat*, with the commentaries of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and Qutb al-Din al-Razi, (Qom, 1375), Vol. 3, pp. 419-421.

[2] *Asfar*, Vol. 3, Part I, pp. 344-5.

[3] Sadra, in addition to being a philosopher in his own right, was a master historian of philosophy. The preceding account is gathered from his detailed analyses in the *Asfar*. See, *inter alia*, *Asfar*, Vol. 3, Part I, pp. 284-291, 318-321 and 344-5.

[4] There is a sizable literature on the concept of knowledge by presence, written mostly by the members of the school of Mulla Sadra. See, for instance, Qazwini's treatment in his *Ettehad-e aqel be ma'qul*, edited with critical notes and commentary by Hasan Hasan-zadeh Amoli (Tehran, 1983). For a contemporary exposition with references to modern Western philosophy, see Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy* (Albany, 1992), and Muhammad Fanaei Eshkevari, *Elm-i Huzuri* (Qom, 1996). See also John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardi and the Heritage of the Greeks*, (Albany, 2000), pp. 164-181.

[5] This view has a number of formulations, one of which is *ittihad al-'ilm, al-'alim wa'l-ma'lum*. It is applied to perception in general under the name *ittihad al-mudrik wa'l-mudrak*.

[6] See for instance *Asfar*, Vol. 3, Part I, p. 443 and *Kitab al-Masha'ir*, ed. by Henry Corbin as *Le Livre des Penetrations metaphysiques* (Teheran-Paris, 1982), Paragraph 114, p. 52.

[7] *Uthulujiyya* has been edited and published by Abdurrahman Badawi in his *Plotinus apud Arabes/Aflutin 'ind al-'Arab* (Cairo, 1955) with some other neo-Platonist fragments. His introduction (pp. 1-66) provides a well-informed discussion of the reception of the so-called pseudo-Aristotle in Islamic philosophy.

[8] In fact the philosopher derives his 'divine happiness' from the peculiar relationship he has with the Divine order: 'And the philosopher holding converse with the divine order, becomes orderly and divine, as far as the nature of man allows...' *The Republic*, VI, 500 c.

[9] A full exposition of this isomorphism is given in the *Timaeus* 35.

[10] For an analysis of the subject in Plato, Plotinus and Proclus, see Jean Pepin, 'Elements pour une histoire de la relation entre l'intelligence et l'intelligible chez Platon et dans le neoplatonisme', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'etranger* 146 (1956), pp. 39-64.

[11] Translation by Hippocrates G. Apostle, *Aristotle's On the Soul*, (Iowa, 1981), p. 51.

[12] Themistius pays a particular attention to this part of *De Anima* in his *Paraphrase*. See *Two Greek Aristotelian Commentators on the Intellect, the De Intellectu Attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius' Paraphrase of Aristotle's De Anima 3.4-8*, Introduction, Translation, Commentary and Notes by Frederic M. Schroeder and Robert B. Todd, (Toronto, 1990), pp. 81-93. See also the Arabic translation of

Themistius' commentary on the De Anima, The Arabic Version of Themistius' 'De Anima', edited by M. C. Lyons, (Norfolk, 1973), Section VI, p. 169 ff.

[13] Translation by W. D. Ross.

[14] 'The intelligible form of every quiddity is detached from matter and its attachments... the intelligible form exists in the external-natural world but it exists as mixed (mukhalitah) with things other than itself, not as purely detached.' Ibn Sina, al-Mabda' wa'l-Ma'ad, ed. by Abdullah Nurani, (Tehran, 1363), pp. 6-8.

[15] See, for instance, Asfar, Vol. 3, Part I, pp. 461-465.

[16] Al-mufasssir, which is the word used by Farabi, is the Arabic translation of Alexander's Greek title 'ho exegetes'. See his Mabadi' ara' ahl al-madinat al-fadilah, translated by Richard Walzer as On the Perfect State, (Chicago, 1998), p. 54.

[17] Porphyry, Via Plotini, 14.13, quoted in the Introduction by F. M. Shroeder and R. B. Todd, p. 1.

[18] Phillip Merlan, Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness (The Hague, 1963), p. 20. Ibrahim Madkour refers to Alexander's doctrine of the intellect as the primary source of 'mysticisme rationaliste' of the Muslim Peripatetics in general and of Farabi in particular. See his La Place d'al Farabi dans l'ecole philosophique musulmane, (Paris, 1934), p. 186.

[19] See the introduction by F. M. Shroeder and R. B. Todd, pp. 2-3.

[20] Averroes, De Anima, I. III, comm. 15, 159, d-e, quoted in G. Quadri, La Philosophie Arabe Dans L'Europe Medievale: Des Origines a Averroes, (Paris, 1960), p. 158. Yet, Alexander is not totally absent from Ibn Rushd's theory of the intellect, which, as G. They points out in Autour du decret de 1210: Alexandre d'Aphrodise. Apercu sur l'influence de sa noetique (Le Saulchoir Kain, 1926), p. 41, is geared in many ways towards establishing a harmony between Alexander and Themistius as the two greatest commentators of the First Teacher. See also Arthur Hyman, 'Aristotle's Theory of the Intellect and its Interpretation by Averroes' in Studies in Aristotle, ed. by Dominic J. O'Meara, (Washington DC, 1981), pp. 161-191. For the place of Alexander and Themistius in Ibn Sina's philosophy, see Dimitri Gutas, Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works (Leiden, 1988).

[21] See Asfar, Vol. 3, Part I, pp. 428-433. The authority of Alexander as to how to read Aristotle was without question so much so that the first chapter of Sadra's treatise called ittihad al-'aql wa'l-ma'qul has the subtitle 'On the degrees of theoretical intellect according to the account given by Alexander of Aphrodisias' (fi darajat al-'aql al-nazari muwafiqan lima zakarahu iskender al-afridusi). This treatise, which I am currently translating into English, is edited and published by Hamid Naji Isfahani in Majmua-yi rasail-i falsafi-yi sadru'l-mut'allihin, pp. 63-103. The aforementioned subtitle is on p. 65.

[22] P. Moraux's Alexandre d'Aphrodise: exegete de la noetique d'Aristote (Paris, 1942) remains to this day the best account of Alexander of Aphrodisias and his place in the Aristotelian tradition. For Ibn Sina's use of Alexander as the primary channel of reading the Aristotelian corpus, see the section on the soul in his Kitab al-Najat, translated by Fazlur Rahman as Avicenna's Psychology: An English Translation of Kitab al-Najat, Book II, Chapter VI, with Historico-philosophical Notes and Textual Improvements on the Cairo Edition, (London, 1952).

- [23] See, A. H. Armstrong, 'The Background of the Doctrine 'that the intelligibles are not outside the Intellect'' in *Les Sources de Plotin*, (Vandoeuvres-Geneve, 1957), p. 393-413.
- [24] Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology*, (Hanover & London, 1991), p. 95.
- [25] Translation by Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page, *The Six Enneads*, (Chicago, 1952), p. 248.
- [26] *The Enneads*, V. 9. 5, translation by J. P. Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*, p. 113.
- [27] Or Platonism for that matter because the so-called distinction between Platonism and neo-Platonism on this particular issue is inconsequential.
- [28] For an interesting exposition of this view, whose roots in Islamic philosophy would require a separate study, see John Leslie, *Value and Existence*, (New Jersey, 1979).
- [29] Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism*, p. 104.
- [30] The words Farabi uses are 'aql, ma'qul and 'aqil.
- [31] According to the Arabic text, this part should be '...after the intellect intellected it [the intelligible form]'.
[32] *Al-madinat al-fadilah*, translation pp. 71-73.
- [33] Asfar, Vol. 3, Part I, pp. 421-427. Sadra recapitulates the first part which he does not quote here by a wording of his own.
- [34] Quoted in Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (London, 1958), p. 16.
- [35] *Al-isharat wa'l-tanbihat*, Vol. 3, pp. 292-295.
- [36] *Al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad*, p. 6.
- [37] Shihaboddin Yahya Sohrawardi, *Ouevres Philosophiques et Mystiques*, edited by Henry Corbin, (Teheran-Paris, 1976), Tome I, p. 69. After discussing the possibility of the unity of the soul with what it know and its rejection by Ibn Sina, Suhrawardi has the following to say on this ongoing debate: 'Ibn Sina, the greatest of all the later philosophers, narrated this view from Porphyry and dishonored him in a way that suits the nobility of neither of them. In spite of this, he clearly claimed the unity of the soul with the intelligible form in *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ad* and some of his other books. Then he finally realized the fallacy of this view.' Ibid.
- [38] L. Gardet interprets Ibn Sina as accepting this view, offering a reading similar to that of Sadra. See his *La Pensee Religieuse D'Avicenne (Ibn Sina)* (Paris, 1951), pp. 153-157. For Fazlur Rahman's critique of Gardet's interpretation, see his *Prophecy in Islam*, pp. 27-28, n. 29. For a general evaluation of the problem, see J. Finnegan, 'Avicenna's Refutation of Porphyrius' *Avicenna Commemoration Volume*, (Calcutta, 1956), pp. 187-203.
- [39] Finnegan, *ibid.* p. 188.
- [40] A. M. Goichon, *Lexique de la Langue Philosophique d'Ibn Sina (Avicenne)* (Paris, 1938), p. 428 for *ittihad* as 'the emergence of one single entity out of the combination of multiple objects' and pp. 434-435 for *ittisal* as conjunction, of which Ibn Sina approves.

[41] Sadra, R. *ittihad al-'aql wa'l-ma'qul*, pp. 20-22. The quote Sadra makes from the *Isharat* appears in V. 3, p. 295. Here, Sadra mentions specifically two aspects of this philosophy: the principiality of being (*asalat al-wujud*) and the continuously changing structure of physical bodies, which is a result of the gradation and intensification (*tashdid*) of being.

[42] *Kitab al-talwihat*, Corbin's edition, Tome I, pp. 68-69.

[43] On the importance of self-knowledge and consciousness in Suhrawardi insofar as our discussion is concerned, see Hossein Ziai, *Knowledge and Illumination: A Study of Suhrawardi's Hikmar al-Ishraq* (Atlant, 1990), pp. 143-154.

[44] Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi in his *al-Nafakhat al-ilahiyyah* defines true knowledge as an absolute unity between the subject and object of knowledge: 'Know that obtaining the knowledge of something as it is and through the perfection of its knowledge hinges upon the union with that which is known. And [real] union with something is based on the disappearance of all [those qualities] that distinguish the knower from the known. In [the world of] existence, there is a Real Divine element (*amr*) between a thing and others, that necessitates the participation (*al-ishtirak*) [of all things in one single reality] without differentiation. And there are other things that distinguish this particular thing from what is other than itself. This is one [of the doctrines] in which there is no doubt according to the school of those who affirm the truth (*mashrab al-tahqiq*)'. *Al-nafakhat al-ilahiyyah*, ed. by Muhammad Khwajawi, (Tehran, 1375/1417), p. 32.

[45] For Maimonides see *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Part 1, sec. 68 translated by M. Friedlander (New York, 1956, 2nd edition), pp. 100-102 where he states that the *intellectus*, *intelligens* and *intelligibile* are one and the same in God and in fact in every intellect in *actus*. Accordingly, the intelligible form of a tree is the intellect in *actus*. For Muhy al-Din al-'Ajami al-Isfahani, see *Epitre sur l'unite et la trinite, traite sur l'intellect, fragment sur l'ame*, edited and translated by M. Allard and G. Troupeau, (Beyrouth, 1962), pp. 53-61 where al-Isfahani uses the idea of the unity of the *al-'aql*, *al-'aql* and *al-ma'qul* as one of the philosophical proofs of the Christian trinity.